

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INFORMATION:  
AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT FOR  
DEVELOPMENT DECISION-MAKING

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It is well-known that the literature of the exact sciences is much better covered by secondary services than is the literature of the social sciences. From the data recently published by the European Association of Scientific Information Dissemination Centers (1), it appears that the existing major information systems are indeed covering virtually all the journal literature of the exact sciences, but probably not more than about 20% of the journal literature of economics and the other social sciences.

But even this figure for journal literature does not reveal the full extent of our failure to obtain bibliographic control over the important literature in the social sciences, and thus to provide access to the information that would really help people who take decisions on development programs both in and for the developing countries. These decision-makers can be found in governments, in international organizations, in aid agencies and in various other types of institution including banks. When we consult such people we find that what they seek is the highly specific and up-to-date information on which they can base their policies, plans and projects, take the right decisions and follow these up with effective action. In general, this highly specific information is not to be found in the conventionally published journals. The information that the decision-makers most value is available mainly in the documents issued by governments and international agencies and in the mimeographed reports produced by various research institutions.

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This is the "fugitive" literature; it is often produced in short runs, is poorly disseminated, is either not catalogued or is inadequately catalogued by the issuing agency, and indeed is not "published" in any accepted sense of this word. Still less is this material covered by any major secondary service.

People concerned with development decision-making need background information on the economic and social environment in which their programs are to be carried out; they need information on trends in these conditions and forecasts for the years ahead; they need information on the resources available for their programs and on the markets for new products; they need information on the successes and failures of other programs related to those that they are planning; they need evaluations of past experience and studies of the impact that such programs have had in the past or are likely to have in the future.

These needs are similar whether the development decision-maker is concerned with overall economic and social strategies or whether he is concerned with strategies in a particular sector: agriculture, industry, public health, population planning, or education. Whatever his interest, he is at this time ill-served by the information resources at his command.

How can we fill this important gap in the available secondary services? The problem is not in the tasks of abstracting, indexing, construction of data bases, and the editing of secondary publications; we know how to do these things if the primary literature is available, and we know that there is a market for the product if these things are done. But the big problem is to find and collect the primary material, so much of which is "fugitive". I would like to tell you today about two programs that have been initiated by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). One of these is highly specialized; the other is extremely broad.

### Low-Cost Rural Health Care

It is one of the tragedies of under-development that there are virtually no modern medical facilities in the rural areas of most of the developing countries. The few physicians available usually concentrate in the cities. Outside the cities, mortality is very high, particularly among children. People are dying or are incapacitated because of the adverse conditions

under which they live and work; clearly, however, it would be impossibly expensive to educate and reward the armies of new physicians that would be needed to provide medical care as we know it in industrialized urban societies. The great hope is to make a substantial improvement by means of relatively inexpensive preventive measures and therapeutic care. The Chinese experience with the so-called "barefoot doctors" has encouraged many countries to take a new look at the problem.

What the Chinese have demonstrated is that there is a potentially large return for an investment in low-level training. At present a great amount of experimentation is underway to adapt the Chinese experience to other societies, or to develop new methods appropriate to local economic and cultural situations. Many societies still have their traditional healers and, for example, in countries like Zaïre, research is underway aimed at supplementing the traditional healing rituals by providing the healers with additional training.

There is a ferment around the world, and a lot of experience is being gained; but this experience is, in general, not yet recorded in any form that makes it easily accessible to others. Reports on this experience are written, but only a few of these reports appear in regularly published journals. The majority of the information is recorded in local bulletins and mimeographed reports. Obtaining these documents often involves making direct contact with the responsible individuals in Ministries of Health, in provincial administrations, in universities and in hospitals.

One of my colleagues, Shahid Akhtar, has attempted to make these direct contacts in many countries. He began by taking a round-the-world trip with a big suitcase, and he has also sent out hundreds of letters from Ottawa. To date, he has collected some 4000 documents that, after evaluation, appear to merit the attention of a larger community of readers. IDRC has, therefore, decided to announce these documents, and we have started to construct a computerized data base and to issue a series of bibliographic publications: each item is reported together with an abstract (2).

This operation is riding on a computer system that we already had in IDRC for handling the material acquired by our library. It is, in fact the ISIS system that we obtained about two years ago by agreement with its originators at the

International Labour Office (ILO). Despite the fact that the computer system did not have to be installed specifically for the rural-health program, the bibliographic work is still costly. We estimate that we are spending at least Dollars 90.- to fully process a single item (collecting, evaluating, abstracting, indexing, recording in the data base, and publication).

In addition we recognize that users of these bibliographies will not reap any real benefits unless they can also acquire the texts of the particular documents that they need. Hence we maintain a file of reproducible copies of the documents, and each volume of the bibliography will contain coupons that may be sent to Ottawa and exchanged for photocopies of selected items.

The total operation is costly. We believe it is justified by the importance of the subject matter, but the real value can only be assessed after the products of the work have been put to use. We plan to issue about six volumes over a period of about two years and then to seek an independent evaluation of the service. If the exercise is seen to be making a significant contribution, we hope that it will then be taken over by an appropriate international organization. Clearly the main problem is in identifying the sources and collecting the literature; we believe that this will be done more effectively and less expensively by an organization that already has an established network of offices around the world.

#### DEVSIIS (Development Sciences Information System)

The very broad system which I would like to tell you about is one that can be considered as belonging to the same family of international cooperative ventures as the system for nuclear sciences (INIS) and the system for agricultural sciences (AGRIS). Like these it would be a mission-oriented system, but the mission would be development in all of its broader economic and social aspects.

There is, as yet, no agreement to go ahead with DEVSIIS. We are now halfway through a six-month feasibility study. However, the proposal (3,4) has attracted a great deal of attention, and the feasibility study is co-sponsored by five

organizations (ILO, IDRC, OECD, UNDP and Unesco). The Steering Committee for the DEVSIS program is convened by Unesco; the Study Team is hosted by ILO.

The Study Team will put forward a series of recommendations for the technical operation of DEVSIS within the guiding principles of UNISIST. Today I do not want to go into these technical details, but I do want to describe why we feel there is a need for such a system, why we feel we must follow the INIS/AGRIS model, and what action is required to get it established.

At a Conference in Ottawa in June 1974, at the meetings of the DEVSIS Steering Committee in October 1974 and April 1975, and in the Study Team itself, we have had innumerable discussions on needs. People who are working in the development community are, because of their needs, causing a great deal of information to be generated. This information is recorded in many different forms, but only a part of it is formally published. Anyone who has been in development work for only a short time can point to instances where new studies have been initiated in ignorance of previous studies of the same subject. The waste of resources is appalling. And so it seems clear that there is a simple but satisfactory method of looking at needs: we believe we shall be meeting a wide spectrum of these needs if we can return to the development community the information that this community has itself caused to be generated.

Over the years many recommendations have been made in favour of better access to information about development activities. Perhaps the most authoritative of these recommendations occurs in the very recent report to the UN Secretary General by his Group of Experts on the Structure of the United Nations System. Immediately after a reference to DEVSIS, the report states (5)

"152. To promote an interdisciplinary approach at the conceptual level to development assistance, as well as to project implementation at the intersectoral level, the Group of Experts recommends that the new United Nations Development Authority should have access to a co-ordinated information system ensuring (a) the effective and co-ordinated collection and evaluation of data by the various

agencies and branches concerned, and (b) the compatibility and reliability of data to be used by decision-makers at national and international levels. To this end, the greatest degree of co-operation between the national and international agencies concerned will be required."

The concluding sentence of this quotation indicates the real reason why only a system on the INIS/AGRIS model can be expected to meet the real need. The fact is that much of the information needed for DEVSIS is not in the public domain. It is under the control of governments, international organizations, banks, research institutes etc. It will be released only if the controlling body sees the release as being in its own interest. This interest cannot be judged item by item, or the release itself will bog down in bureaucratic processes. Each organization must recognize that the overall value it receives in obtaining the information produced by other organizations more than compensates it for the release of its own information. With this recognition will come a consensus among governments and international agencies to move ahead. INIS has demonstrated that governments and international agencies can move their political machinery to arrive at such a consensus, and that then each participant does begin to supply his own information in the knowledge that the others will begin to supply theirs.

The INIS/AGRIS model, under which each participant accepts to report the information produced in its own territory, is the only model we know that stands a chance of getting the necessary information reported to the system. It is also possibly the only model that would be acceptable in terms of cost. Governments and other organizations can be persuaded to accept the axiom that they should bear the cost of bringing their own production of information under bibliographic control (even though they may not be doing it at present, they recognize this as an internal management deficiency). Then, provided they perform this task according to a common set of standards, it is relatively inexpensive to add the international superstructure for collecting the products of the separate activities and merging them to build a world data base. The central operations for DEVSIS (handling perhaps 150 000 records/year) would probably involve an annual outlay of about Dollars 1 million in "international money" - but only if the really costly work

of collecting and inputting the primary information is carried out within the participating organizations at their own expense and in response to their own needs.

Conversely an entirely centralized system would have no assurance of securing the release of the information it needs, and it would be prohibitively expensive.

INIS was launched only after the Member States of the International Atomic Energy Agency had made the necessary political decision. AGRIS will continue only if the Member States of FAO make a similar political decision. It is comforting that DEVSIS has five co-sponsors, but it would be even more comforting if there were an intergovernmental organization whose Member States had approved the incorporation of DEVSIS in its regular program and budget.

There are several international organizations that could conceivably provide such a home for DEVSIS but - as yet - there is no clear vision as to which would be the most appropriate. DEVSIS attempts to cut across all sectors; indeed its subject scope is being defined to leave most of the purely sectoral information to existing or future sector-oriented systems. The residue of non-sectoral and inter-sectoral material is, because of its breadth, extremely significant for defining development strategies. The DEVSIS Study Team certainly shares the view of the UN Group of Experts on the need to capture this material.

The summer of 1975 is going to be a time for re-appraising the entire range of UN activities related to development, and it will be crowned by a Special Session of the General Assembly in September. This, following the recommendation of the Group of Experts, may provide the opportunity to obtain the political decisions that will enable DEVSIS, or something like DEVSIS, to get started: it is certainly needed.

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